

News Release



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President Focuses on Wetlands Conservation; Interior Announces New Tool to Enhance Conservation Efforts in Prairie Pothole Region

President Bush today said his Administration is committed to a national goal of conserving three million acres of wetlands across the nation, benefiting waterfowl, other migratory birds and wildlife over the next five years. The President made the announcement at an Earth Day event in Wells, Maine, where he worked on a local wetlands restoration effort.

To help achieve that goal, the President highlighted the contributions of four U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service initiatives: the North American Wetlands Conservation program, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program, the Coastal program, and the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund (the Duck Stamp program).

"Our partnership-driven wetlands conservation efforts have helped conserve these vital fish and wildlife habitats all across the nation," Service Director Steve Williams said today. "They represent the best in citizen-centered conservation efforts. President Bush and Secretary Norton recognize the important role our efforts play in wetlands conservation and look forward to a brighter future for America's wildlife and the American people who all benefit from healthy wetlands."

In addition, the Department of the Interior today announced a new tool for working cooperatively with private landowners in the Prairie Pothole region to protect wetlands by simplifying the process used to value wetland and grassland easements. The new process will reduce by more than one month the process to establish minimally restrictive easements. Today's action will improve the efficiency of such efforts in the Prairie Pothole region, which produces 50 percent to 75 percent of primary species of ducks on the continent.

"This new tool will make it easier for us to work with ranchers, farmers, other private landowners, and our partners to conserve important wetland habitat throughout the Prairie Pothole region, long considered the nation's 'Duck Factory,'" Williams added.

The President also directed that the next National Wetlands Inventory update, managed by the Service, should be completed by the end of 2005, five years ahead of the current schedule, and asked that the updates be done more frequently thereafter.

The President referenced the contributions of four Service programs that contribute to wetlands conservation and will play a key role in achieving his goal to conserve three million acres of wetlands over the next five years.

- North American Wetlands Conservation Fund: The North American grants program provides matching grants to private landowners, States, non-government conservation organizations, Tribes and others to acquire, restore or enhance wetlands conservation. The President is proposing \$54 million for the North American program next year, which includes a \$16.5 million increase over this year. Complete details on the North American program appear at <http://birdhabitat.fws.gov/NAWMP/plans.htm>.
- Partners for Fish and Wildlife: The Partners program has established relationships with more than 30,000 private landowners nationwide. It provides technical assistance and restoration expertise for these landowners. Since 1987, the program has restored 677,000 acres of wetlands and 5,560 miles of stream and streamside habitat. The President's budget for next year requests of \$50 million includes a nearly \$8 million increase over this year. For further information on the Partners program, check <http://partners.fws.gov>.
- Coastal Program: The Coastal program leads Service conservation efforts in bays, estuaries and watersheds around the U.S. Coast and Great Lakes. The President is proposing to provide \$13.1 million for next year - an increase of nearly \$3 million over the current year. Additional information on the Coastal program is available at <http://www.fws.gov/cep/coastweb.html>.
- Migratory Bird Conservation Fund: The Migratory Bird Conservation Fund acquires migratory bird breeding, resting and wintering areas, with an emphasis on the nation's prairie pothole region. The President's budget request of \$43.3 million includes a \$1 million increase for next year's budget. Additional information about the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund can be found at <http://realty.fws.gov/mbcc.html>.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 63 Fish and Wildlife Management offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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